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SUBJECT: AN OVERVIEW OF BURMA-RELATED CIVIL SOCIETY TRAINING PROGRAMS  
IN CHIANG MAI

REF: CHIANG MAI 32

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¶1. SUMMARY. Exile political and social activists from Burma are using Chiang Mai as a base for the training and development of a new generation of leaders. Like their counterparts in the media (reftel), political exiles have found Chiang Mai to be a convenient and relatively safe harbor from which to engage in activities restricted by Burma's ruling junta. With help from foreign government funding and implicit RTG permission to operate on Thai soil, organizations here have created a shadow educational and professional development system for hundreds of young activists. End Summary.

¶2. Leadership training NGOs that have established roots in Chiang Mai in recent years include the Foreign Affairs Training program for political activists, the Community Development and Civic Empower program for social development workers, and the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth for younger leaders from underserved communities. Like other civil society training groups in the city, these organizations cite Chiang Mai's proximity to Burma, low cost of living, and good connectivity with the outside world as top draws. Western governments and foundations provide most funding, while Thai officials sympathetic to these programs' causes are willing to host their schools in Thailand -- although security concerns usually prompt the organizations to operate out of unmarked compounds on the edge of town.

¶3. Security issues mean most students keep a low profile as well and say they rarely interact with their Thai neighbors. Some tell of slipping across the border in the middle of the night or trekking through the Burmese jungle for several days in order to reach Chiang Mai in time for their program's start date. When they arrive, they find themselves in a microcosm of the Burma that could have been - a dynamic mix of ethnicities living and working together toward shared goals. Here in the classroom and on the compounds, English and Burmese are more likely to unite the students than their own native languages and dialects, and many students admit to forming their first positive impressions of other ethnic groups via their experience in Chiang Mai.

¶4. ConGen Chiang Mai has supported these groups through book donations, speaking at class graduations, and inviting students to the consulate for discussions on U.S. foreign policy,. At the

same time, students and staff have become valuable sources for information on Burma and border security issues. Most USG Burma-related funding in Thailand concentrates on health issues or on activities along the border, but even programs not receiving U.S. grants are overwhelmingly pro-American. Instructors draw inspiration from U.S. models on everything from political development to educational testing.

15. The following three organizations represent the variety of programs -- political activism, community development, and professional skills - present in Chiang Mai. The programs are different in scope and mission, but all produce similar results: students gain skills and inspiration to pursue careers that likely would be denied to them in Burma.

#### Political Exiles Get Crash Course on International Human Rights Advocacy

16. The FOREIGN AFFAIRS TRAINING (FAT) program is sponsored by the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), a multi-ethnic, Thailand-based political exile group that supports democracy building and reconciliation efforts in Burma. The program, now on its fifth class, receives money primarily through an NCUB grant via the Dutch government. Other EU governments assist with logistical support. FAT brings together up to two dozen young leaders from Burma-focused NGOs for training sessions on international relations, history, English, and professional skills. For nine months, the students, most aged 21-25, receive a crash course in the liberal arts with a focus on Burma affairs and using their knowledge for public advocacy. Each FAT class draws from a variety of Burmese groups, both inside and outside of Burma. The current class represents several ethnicities, including Burman, Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Kachin.

17. Following formal studies at a Chiang Mai compound, FAT graduates serve in one-year internships at human rights NGOs around the world. Previous students have worked in the United

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Kingdom, Czech Republic, Poland, and South Africa. They return to their original sponsoring NGOs, such as the Karen Women's Organization or Ethnic Nationalities Council, with the aim of taking on more leadership responsibilities. FAT graduates have briefed visiting USG officials, spoken at international peace building conferences, and placed op-eds in regional media. One, a Thai citizen, received an International Visitor program grant to study NGOs and civil society in the United States.

#### Community Leaders Learn Development Skills to Bring Back Home

18. The COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIC EMPOWERMENT (CDCE) program also organized by the NCUB, focuses on building grassroots organizing skills to help support social services lacking in many Burmese communities. CDCE's three-month program includes specialized skill training for social services, such as grant writing, budgeting, and participatory development. The program is now on its second class of 30 students and charges a \$2,500 tuition fee, which has allowed it to nearly cover its operating costs (students usually receive grants from other donor agencies to attend). The Dutch, Norwegian, and Swiss governments provided funds for the initial start-up costs.

19. Organizers say they intentionally avoid political issues, both to appease nervous administrators at Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Social Sciences, which hosts the program, and to protect graduates, who return to their villages in Burma to take on high-profile roles. Although a few students have been former political prisoners, most participants have non-political backgrounds. Most are under age 40 and have had prior experience in civic development. CMU officials have asked that future sessions be expanded to include participants from other underdeveloped areas, such as Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Yunnan Province, China.

#### Shan State Youth Get Exposure to the Outside World and Their

## Neighbors

¶10. The School for Shan State Nationalities Youth (SSSNY), one of more than 30 Chiang Mai NGOs receiving funds from the New York-based Open Society Institute, provides capacity building and educational opportunities for Shan State residents. The school recruits students aged 18-22 from a variety of ethnic groups living in Shan State, including Shan, Kachin, Palaung, Lahu, and Pao. Like the NCUB's FAT, the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) designed the program to train the next generation of leaders who would otherwise be unlikely to find opportunities for professional development and political advocacy inside Burma, or in Thailand, where the RTG denies refugee services to ethnic Shan. However, SSSNY recruits younger students primarily from severely underdeveloped areas in Shan State. Unlike their FAT counterparts, students here have little prior exposure to higher education or NGO advocacy.

¶11. Instructors at the school - primarily American and Canadian - teach English, computers, and history, but also offer advice and guidance on professional development, such as Western styles of dress and etiquette. Organizers say overcoming the lack of quality secondary education and cultural barriers among the multi-ethnic student body are significant challenges for the students. One instructor noted during the most recent class's opening ceremony that several students spoke three to four languages fluently, but had tasted ice cream for the first time the night before. SWAN leader Charm Tong, who founded SSSNY in 2001, said the program has graduated more than 190 students, most of whom have returned to Shan State or the Thai-Burma border area to work with NGOs as community health workers and teachers.

COMMENT: A Great Start for Education, But Long-Term Staying Power Unknown

¶12. As the current generation of exile leaders moves into retirement or resettles in foreign countries, communities inside Burma and along the Thai border are in serious need for capable and well-trained staff to continue political struggles and provide humanitarian aid. Burma's instability has pushed these training programs into Thailand and created the shadow educational system that now exists. Many former students have already taken on larger responsibilities in political and civil society organizations, but some fear that too much exposure to

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the outside world pushes others into careers and personal lives away from the troubles of Burma, a choice made easier the longer they are separated from relatives and communities inside Burma. While initial job placement rates are impressive, most programs have only just begun to track alumni and analyze the impact of their work.

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